Scene Song: "Fire In My Heart" ~ Escape From New York

December 21st had arrived in Pelmont, bright, warm, and blue as ever. There was no winter here, not really. No brittle air. No gray sky. No dead trees scratching at the edges of the world. In Pelmont, even on the twenty-first of December, the morning came in golden and soft, the sun already glowing orange-gold over Pelmont by eight a.m., the sky a flawless blue, the temperature sitting at a perfect eighty degrees with a breeze just gentle enough to move the palms and stir the white curtains in open windows. It was Saturday. It was Jimmy's birthday. And Sir Lord Jimmy Crystal, turning thirty-seven with all the ceremony and swagger of a self-appointed king, was on his way to Sasha's house for his usual morning routine: cereal and one episode of *Teletubbies* before the day properly began. He came down the walk looking immaculate.

He wore a navy tracksuit with white stripes down the sleeves and legs, crisp and fitted, with spotless white trainers, enough silver chains to catch the morning sun, rings flashing on his fingers, and his little tiara perched just right on his platinum blond hair, which had been styled to perfection. Not one curl out of place. Not one detail neglected. Jimmy didn't do birthdays halfway, even if this particular birthday had begun with nothing more glamorous than breakfast cereal and Teletubbies. He climbed Sasha's porch steps with that loose, cocksure Sir Lord stride of his, already talking to himself under his breath.

He pulled out his key, slid it into the lock, and turned it. The lock clicked. Jimmy pushed the door, but nothing happened. His brow furrowed. He pushed again, a little harder this time, still nothing. The smile slipped off his face. For one split second, all the morning brightness around him seemed to pull away. His body went still. His heart gave one hard, ugly kick in his chest. The old thoughts came quickly, like they always did when something was wrong before he had time to stop them. *Why isn't it opening? What happened? Where is she?* His hand stayed on the knob, but his whole body had tensed. His jaw tightened. His breathing shallowed. A shadow passed over his face so fast it almost didn't belong to this version of him, the healed version, the one who lived here under blue skies and knew that not every strange moment meant disaster. But trauma was a sly bastard. It still knew how to reach him. Jimmy swallowed. Then, just as his mind started to turn darker, his eyes caught something taped to the window beside the door—a note. He blinked. His shoulders loosened a fraction. Jimmy turned, stepped over to the window, and peeled the note from the glass. His eyes moved across Sasha's handwriting: *Sorry, Jimmy. Come back around noon. It's your birthday, and I can't have you spoiling the surprise inside until then.*

He read it once, then again. The tension drained out of him so quickly he actually let out a breathy little laugh through his nose. His shoulders dropped. The line between his brows disappeared. For a moment, he just stood there on the porch in the warm morning sun, holding the note and letting the relief move through him. Then that relief turned into something brighter—excitement. A slow smile pulled at his mouth.

"A surprise," he murmured.

His eyes lit up.

“For me.”

He looked toward the front door as if he could somehow stare through it and force the mystery to reveal itself anyway.

“What’ve you got in there, then?” he asked the house suspiciously. “Balloons? Cake? A throne? A tasteful mural celebratin’ my continued magnificence?”

He looked back at the note, his smile widening.

“Well played, Sasha. Very well played.”

Then he lifted the note more as if he were addressing it personally.

“Fine. I’ll come back at noon. But whatever’s in there better be spectacular, sis.”

He paused, gave a tiny approving nod to the window, and joked:

“And if there’s no good cereal involved in this surprise, I’ll be deeply fuckin’ disappointed.”

That smile stayed on his face another second, crooked and boyish now, excitement getting the better of his usual cool. He folded the note carefully, tucked it into his pocket as if it mattered, then turned on his heel and headed back down the porch steps with sudden speed. By the time he hit the walkway, he was almost bouncing. Noon, he had to wait until noon. Jimmy pointed once at the house as he backed away, smiling like a man who had just been handed the best possible problem.

“Keep your secrets, then,” he called, “but you’ve got exactly four hours before I return lookin’ flawless and ready to be astonished. Howzat!”
And with that, Sir Lord Jimmy Crystal dashed back down the path and off toward his own house under the blazing blue December sky, carrying with him relief, curiosity, and the kind of birthday excitement that made him feel, just for a little while, much younger than thirty-seven. Behind him, Sasha’s house sat quiet and sunlit, its surprise still hidden inside, and noon suddenly felt very far away.

Scene Song: “When The Going Gets Tough” ~ Billy Ocean

By noon, Sasha’s house looked like joy had exploded inside it. Pelmont, as ever, was all sun and warmth and impossible blue sky, the December air outside still a breezy eighty degrees, but inside Sasha’s living room, the season had given way entirely to celebration. Bright balloons in every color crowded the corners and floated in shining clusters near the ceiling. Rainbow pennant banners draped across the walls in cheerful arcs. Confetti had been scattered with loving abandon over the coffee table and along the floor near the sofa. Wrapped presents in vivid paper sat arranged beneath the low table, ribbons curling, bows

puffed up and gleaming in the sunlight. Across the wall behind the sofa stretched a huge, colorful birthday banner that shouted **HAPPY BIRTHDAY JIMMY** in loud, playful letters, each one bursting with color like it had been designed by a committee of delighted children and unapologetic extroverts.

On the sofa were bright throw pillows in yellow, orange, blue, and gold, and all around the room, the whole thing had the warm, slightly over-the-top feeling of a party arranged not just with love, but with the precise knowledge that the guest of honor was a very dramatic man with exacting tastes and a deep appreciation for spectacle.

In the kitchen, Sasha was still fussing.

She stood at the island in a soft green dress that moved lightly around her knees whenever she shifted. The dress looked airy and pretty against her skin, feminine and summery in that effortless Pelmont way, and on her feet were glossy jelly sandals that clicked gently against the floor when she paced. Her long brown hair had been pulled back into a ponytail, with her bangs falling prettily across her forehead and brushing near her eyes. She looked beautiful in the easy, bright way she always did, though at that moment her expression was one of faint distress as she stared down at the wrapped gift in front of her, as if it had personally failed her. Remmick came in through the back entry just as she was adjusting the ribbon for the third time.

He looked good enough to irritate people with it. White long-sleeved shirt, thin enough for the warmth, sleeves pushed just slightly, jeans, clean sneakers. Effortless. Handsome. Relaxed. He paused just inside the kitchen doorway, taking in the sight of Sasha with the wrapping paper, the ribbon, the scissors, the furrow between her brows, and a fond little smile touched his mouth.

“The gift is wrapped beautifully,” he said.

Sasha looked up at him, then immediately looked back down at the present with a dissatisfied frown.

“Really?”

“Yeah.”

She tilted the gift in her hands and frowned harder.

“You really think so?”

“I do,” he replied with a faint smile.

“Because I don’t.” She turned it another way. “I think it could use a better design. Or maybe a different fold here. Maybe a second ribbon. Or a thinner ribbon. Or maybe tissue paper under the bow. I don’t know, something. It just doesn’t feel perfect.”

Remmick’s smile deepened.

“It’s paper and ribbon, Sasha.”

“Yes, but it’s Jimmy’s paper and ribbon,” she said, as if that explained everything, which to her it did. “There’s a difference. Jimmy notices things. Jimmy notices *everything.* If one corner looks lazy, he’ll know. If the bow looks uneven, he’ll know. If the tape line looks like it was placed by somebody with poor judgment, he’ll definitely know.”

Remmick laughed under his breath. Sasha kept going, warming into her own spiral.

“And then he’ll do that face.”

“What face?”

She looked up and immediately did an eerily perfect Jimmy imitation, brows lifting, mouth twisting slightly to one side in regal disgust.

“*Mm. Lovely. Very festive. Which drunk fuckin’ raccoon wrapped this, then?*”

That got a real laugh out of him.

“I’m serious,” she said, still holding the gift, now on a proper ramble. “Jimmy is very particular. He’s particular about how his tracksuits hang, how his cereal sits in the bowl, how his toast is cut, how his hair falls, how people pronounce things, how chains lie on his chest, how the room smells, how the ice clinks in a glass. If one thing is out of place with him, it’s bad. Not just bad. End-of-days bad. Like he’ll stare at it and go quiet, and somehow the whole room starts feeling judged.”

Remmick laughed again. Sasha waved the gift at him.

“And this is his birthday. His birthday. I just want it to feel right.”

She was still frowning at the present when Remmick stepped closer, gently took hold of her by the arms, and turned her toward him. The movement was easy and practiced.

“Relax,” he said softly.

She looked up at him. He wore that small, charming smile of his, the one that always seemed like it knew more than it was saying.

“The gift is wrapped beautifully,” he said again. “And it looks as beautiful as you.”

Sasha laughed instantly and playfully smacked his arm as she stepped away from him.

“You’re so corny.”

“Yeah, but I’m still right,” he said with a smile.

She shook her head, smiling now despite herself, picked up the gift, and headed toward the living room. He followed behind her as she kept talking.

“You laugh, but I mean it. Jimmy can tell if somebody moved one object three inches to the left. He’ll walk in and go, ‘Something's spiritually wrong in here.’”

“That does sound like him,” Remmick said with a smile.

“It *is* him,” Sasha said. “He’ll know if the sofa pillow’s crooked from across the room. He’ll know if one balloon is hanging lower than the others. He’ll know if a slice of cake was cut with weak energy.”

Remmick barked out a laugh.

“We’ll tell him the balloons were arranged under duress,” he joked.

“No, because then he’ll inspect them harder.”

By the time they entered the living room, everybody else was already there, gathered in bright clusters of conversation, waiting with the warm impatience that always comes right before somebody beloved arrives. Ian sat broad and comfortable near one end of the sofa, looking amused about something Samson had just said. Spike was perched nearby with the restless energy he always seemed to carry, while Skylar, Kellie, and Isla all sat together, leaning in and talking quietly.

Jane Ji was cross-legged in one of the chairs, listening with a faint smile while George and Tom stood near the wall, drinks in hand, mid-conversation with Matthew and Cathy. Jackie, regal as ever and dressed beautifully, sat with the easy dignity of a woman who could command a room without ever raising her voice. Across the rest of the room were Stack, Smoke, Sammy, Annie, Mary, Bo, Grace, and Delta Slim, all scattered around in loose groups, the whole place humming with low laughter, bits of conversation, and the shared secret of a surprise waiting to detonate. Sasha came in carrying the wrapped gift and said:

“Nobody touch this.”

“That bad, huh?” Stack said, looking over immediately.

“It’s not bad,” Sasha said, narrowing her eyes.

Stack lifted both hands.

“All right, all right. I’m just sayin’, the way you walked in with that face, I thought the paper offended you.”

Stack and Samson laughed.

“It kind of did,” Remmick said with an amused smile, which earned him a look from Sasha and a laugh from Stack.

Smoke laughed lightly from where he was standing near Annie.

“Man ain’t even here yet and everybody’s actin’ like we’re preparin’ for inspection,” Smoke said with a shake of his head.

“We are,” Sasha said at once.

That got a round of knowing laughter through the room.

“He’ll love it,” Ian said as he leaned back slightly and smiled.

“He better,” Sasha said, setting the gift carefully on the side table for the moment. “I’ve been up all morning trying to make sure everything’s right.”

“If he doesn’t love it, we’ll just say Samson was the one who decorated all this shit wrong,” Skylar said before sharing a laugh with Stack, Smoke, Remmick, and Ian.

Samson gaped and smiled with a shake of his head before laughing.

“Aww, so you’re going to throw me under the bus, huh?” Samson asked, smiling.

Skylar shrugged with a faint smile.

“Hey, take one for the team, Sam,” Skylar joked before Samson bawled up a piece of paper and playfully threw it at Skylar while laughing, resulting in Skylar laughing as well.

Jackie smiled at her daughter in that warm, proud way only a mother can.

“Well, look, baby girl, I’ll say this,” Jackie said, “I think you could’ve hung one balloon and put a cracker on a plate and Jimmy still would’ve adored it.”

Sasha made a face.

“Mama, no, he would not.”

“Yes, he would,” Jackie replied.

“No,” Sasha said, “he would say, ‘Where’s the effort? Is this a budget ambush?”

“Yeah, that sounds like him,” Tom said after a light laugh.

“It does,” Mary said, smiling.

Stack shook his head.

“Nah,” Stack said, “the real question is whether he’s gonna cry, curse, or pretend he don’t care for five full minutes before cryin’ anyway.”

“*Cry*?” Spike said, looking delighted by the idea. “*Jimmy*?”

“Not proper cry,” Stack said. “I’m talkin’ that Jimmy version, where his eyes go shiny and then he starts insultin’ everybody so nobody notices.”

“That’s true,” Sammy said as he smiled his quiet little smile at that, and Annie nodded.

Delta Slim chuckled.

“Boy’s gonna walk in, see all this, then spend ten minutes actin’ like he expected nothin’ less,” Delta Slim chimed in.

Skylar lifted a shoulder.

“To be fair, it’s a hell of a setup,” Skylar said.

“It is,” said Grace, looking around. “Sasha, you did good.”

Sasha smiled, then she heard it, the faint metallic click of the kitchen door unlocking. Her eyes widened instantly. She jumped to her feet, one hand flying up.

“Shh, everybody! Quiet, that’s him!” Sasha said in a low voice.

The room changed in a breath. All talking snapped off, people straightened, balloons rustled softly overhead. Stack grinned and leaned forward. Smoke folded his arms with a look that tried to be neutral and failed. Sammy’s smile widened. Jackie sat up straighter. Remmick’s expression warmed. Everybody went still. From the kitchen came the sound of the door opening, then Jimmy’s footsteps. Then, unmistakably, Jimmy himself, lightly whistling some strange little tune that sounded like a man trying to whistle grandeur and suspicion at the same time. Sasha pressed a hand to her chest and looked around wildly, making sure everybody was ready. In the kitchen, Jimmy paused. He’d come exactly as promised and looked, in his own opinion and likely in everyone else’s—*flawless*.

He wore the tracksuit from that morning, navy with crisp white striping, tailored and sharp against his frame, along with spotless white trainers. Silver chains flashed against his chest. Rings gleamed on his fingers. The tiara sat perfectly placed on his platinum blond hair, which had been styled with such care it looked like he’d personally negotiated with every strand into obedience. He walked into the kitchen with his usual Sir Lord swagger, though there was an extra current of birthday curiosity in him now, some bright little charge he was trying not to show too openly. He looked around the empty kitchen, brow raised, faint smile touching his mouth, nothing, no balloons, no cake, no streamers, no people leaping out from behind counters. Jimmy let out a small laugh and shook his head.

“Crafty bastards,” he murmured.

He took a few more steps, glancing around the counters, the table, the corners, clearly clocking the complete lack of evidence.

“What is this, then?” he muttered to himself. “An invisible party? A surprise built entirely on vibes? Bold.”

Then he moved toward the living room. The second he crossed the threshold, the room erupted.

“*Surprise***!**”

Jimmy stopped dead. Everybody was on their feet. The shout hit him all at once, along with the sight of the room in full. His eyes went wide. For a moment, he simply stared. The banner behind the sofa burst across his vision first, huge and colorful and impossible to miss. Then the balloons in radiant bunches, the rainbow pennants strung high across the walls, the confetti glittering in the sunlight, the bright pillows, the gifts stacked and shining, the whole room transformed into something festive and loud and lovingly excessive. He gaped, *actually* gaped. It all rushed him in one wave, the color, the warmth, the people, the effort, the fact of all of them being there for him, and his face opened up into stunned astonishment so fast it nearly looked younger than him. Then, within a second, everybody was moving, voices overlapped, laughter broke OUT, and people started clapping. Jimmy stood frozen in the doorway as the sound of them hit him from every side.

“Happy birthday!”

“Look at his face!”

“He’s speechless!”

“Get him!” Samson exclaimed with an amused smile.

Then they were on him, not aggressively, just with the force of affection. Ian got to him first, pulling him into a big embrace that Jimmy returned a second late, still visibly trying to process the room. Jackie was right after, kissing his cheek and smoothing a hand to the side

of his face like she'd known he'd be overwhelmed. Sasha got to him next, grinning hard, wrapping both arms around him. Jimmy hugged her back tighter than he meant to, one hand still at her shoulder when she pulled away.

Stack clasped his shoulder and pulled him into a quick side-hug, Smoke gave him a rough one-armed grip that carried more warmth than he'd ever admit, Sammy smiled and hugged him gently, Annie hugged him, Mary hugged him, Bo clapped him on the back, Grace laughed and squeezed his arm, Delta Slim hugged him while chuckling low in his chest, and then the rest of them were there too, one after the other, Skylar, Kellie, Isla, Jane Ji, George, Tom, Matthew, Cathy, Samson, Spike, all crowding the birthday king in a bright, chaotic wave of love and greetings until Jimmy looked like he'd been swallowed by his own surprise party. Through it all, he kept trying to say something and failing. At last, Jimmy pulled back just enough to look around at everyone, then back at the room, then back at Sasha. His mouth fell open again.

"You…" Jimmy said as he pressed a hand flat to his chest. "You sneaky, magnificent woman."

Sasha burst out laughing.

Jimmy turned in a slow circle, taking the room in again with visible disbelief.

"Look at this," Jimmy said. "Look at this fuckin' room."

He pointed toward the banner as if it had personally stunned him.

"The letters are fuckin' huge!" Jimmy exclaimed with a smile.

"Of course they are," said Stack. "You think we'd *whisper* 'happy birthday' to you?"

"The balloons," Jimmy said as he pointed upward, "the confetti, the presents, the whole thing's been transformed into a celebratory command center."

Everyone laughed.

"I mean, wow," Jimmy said, still looking around with wide, glittering eyes, "this is outrageous. This is quality fuckin' work. This is…"

Jimmy stopped and looked at Sasha again, his expression going unexpectedly soft.

"This is beautiful," Jimmy said.

For a second, the swagger fell away and the truth showed plain. Sasha smiled at him, her own eyes warm.

"Happy birthday, Jimmy."

He looked at her for one extra beat, shoulders softening, something genuinely touched moving through his face. Then, because he was still Jimmy, he straightened a little, drew himself up, and said in a richly theatrical tone:

“Well. Aye. This is the standard I deserve.”

That got the whole room laughing.

“Yup, there he is,” Stack said with a smile.

“I mean, well, what did you think was gonna happen?” Jimmy said. “That Sir Lord Jimmy Crystal would turn thirty-seven in some under-decorated corner like an ordinary bastard?”

Everyone laughed. Jimmy moved farther into the room, still taking everything in, still visibly stunned by the sheer amount of work and love. Eventually, Sasha got him to sit, though only barely. He lowered himself onto the sofa like a king accepting court, one ankle over his knee, chains catching light, tiara still perfect, though the expression on his face had gone softer underneath the performance. He kept glancing around the room like he couldn’t quite believe all these people were really here, all this color really for him. Sasha noticed. She sat beside him, close enough that their shoulders brushed.

“You okay?” she asked him.

Jimmy looked at her, and for a moment, the room’s noise softened around them. He nodded once, but slower than usual.

“Aye,” he said quietly. Then, with a small smile that didn’t try to hide itself:

“Better than okay.”

That smile touched her heart. Then, because Jimmy could never let sincerity go too long unchaperoned, he looked around again and added:

“I’m also extremely impressed by the scale of this operation.”

“I know,” she said after laughing.

“No, I mean it,” he said with a faint smile. “This is professionally excessive. I feel properly celebrated.”

“Good,” she replied with a single nod.

“You should,” Stack said with a smile from across the room. “She’s been stressin’ over this all morning.”

Jimmy turned sharply to Sasha with a faint frown and a half smile.

“You were stressin’?”

Sasha rolled her eyes at him before lightly and briefly laughing

“Don’t start.”

He narrowed his eyes at her.

“Was the gift wrapped under duress?”

The whole room laughed, and Sasha pointed at Stack.

“See? See what I mean?”

Jimmy sat up straighter.

“No, hold on. What’s wrong with the gift wrapping?” Jimmy asked.

“Nothing,” Sasha said quickly.

“That sounded like a lie,” Jimmy said with a full smile.

“Shut up, it wasn’t a lie,” she said after lightly laughing again.

“It had lie texture,” Jimmy replied with a faint frown and a half smile.

Remmick laughed. There was more laughter. More chatter. More people talking over each other. The room stayed light and bright and easy, carrying that warm party hum that felt like love wearing festive clothes. Outside, Pelmont stayed blue and sunlit, palm leaves shifting lazily beyond the windows, but inside, the whole house had folded around Jimmy and made him the center of something wonderful. He sat in it with the half-disbelieving, half-smug look of a man who had been deeply moved and intended to recover by being funny about it. At one point, he looked over the room again and said, almost to himself:

“All right. This is dangerous,” Jimmy said with a faint smile.

“Why?” Sasha asked as she looked at him.

“Because now I’ve had a proper birthday ambush once, I’ll expect theatrical excellence every year.”

Sasha, Remmick, and Jackie laughed.

“Of course you will,” Sasha responded.

“I’m just being honest,” Jimmy said, smiling.

“You’re being Jimmy,” Jackie said, half smiling with a brow raised.

“That too,” he responded.

<u>Scene Song: “I Love You Always Forever” ~ Donna Lewis</u>

Later, the room changed as the whole party seemed to settle into something warmer. Lighter. Closer. The balloons still gleamed in the sunlight. The confetti still sparkled across the coffee table. The bright banner still stretched across the wall behind the sofa in a loud, playful color. But now the room felt fuller somehow, not just with celebration, but with feeling. Jimmy sat in the middle of it all like a man trying very hard not to look too moved by his own birthday party and failing every few seconds. He lounged on the sofa with one ankle over his knee, tracksuit crisp, chains shining, tiara perfect, platinum blond hair still laid just right, but his eyes kept wandering across the room in these little stolen glances, to the banner, to the people, to Sasha, to the presents waiting nearby. Every time his face softened too much, he corrected with some theatrical expression of cool detachment, but it wasn't fooling anybody. Sasha saw it first, smiled to herself, and then clapped her hands once.

"Okay," she said, bright-eyed. "Gift time."

Immediately, Jimmy sat up straighter, which got a laugh from half the room.

"I didn't move," Jimmy said at once with a faint smile.

"Nah, you absolutely moved," Stack said, smiling.

"Yeah, you leaned forward like a Labrador," Spike added before sharing a laugh with Isla and Samson.

Jimmy turned his head slowly and looked at them both with a half smile and a magnificent contemptuous frown.

"Hey, it's my birthday," Jimmy said, "my natural enthusiasm ought not be mistaken for dog behavior."

That got more laughter.

Jackie smiled from her seat.

"Open your presents, baby."

Jimmy glanced at the pile again, then back at the room, trying and failing to look casual.

"Well," Jimmy said, smiling and then clearing his throat and smoothing the front of his tracksuit jacket with regal importance, "all right then. Let the tribute portion commence."

"Tribute portion," Samson repeated, laughing.

"Aye," Jimmy said. "I've shown up, I've been ambushed, I've been magnificently celebrated, and now I assume goods and services are to follow. Standard birthday protocol."

Everyone laughed. The gifts started coming one by one, sometimes in pairs, sometimes with somebody half-laughing before Jimmy even got the wrapping off because they already knew he'd have an opinion about it. Ian went first. He handed Jimmy a sleek black gift box, and Jimmy opened it with suspicious care. Inside was a heavy silver watch, clean and elegant, expensive-looking without being loud. The metal caught the light in a cold, handsome flash.

Jimmy lifted it out and stared.

“Shite,” Jimmy said, turning it in his hand, “this is fuckin’ serious.”

“I just thought you might like something sharp and flashy,” Ian said with a smile.

Jimmy slid it onto his wrist, lifted his arm, and squinted at it like he was judging a business rival.

“This makes me look like a bastard with fuckin’ appointments,” Jimmy declared, smiling.

The room broke into laughter.

“That’s one way of putting it,” Ian said with a smile as he shook his head.

“No, I mean it,” Jimmy said, still looking at the watch. “This says, ‘I arrive on time, intimidate subtly, and possibly own property.’”

“That sounds like you already,” Smoke muttered with a very brief and faint half smile.

“Exactly. It’s harmonious,” Jimmy said with a smile as he pointed at him.

Then Jimmy looked back at Ian, his smile softening.

“I love it. Thank you, Dad.”

Ian nodded once, warm and easy, before hugging Jimmy. After that came Samson and Spike, who together handed him a long, narrow bag. Jimmy opened it and pulled out a pair of designer sunglasses with dark lenses and sharp black frames.

Jimmy slid them on immediately, then he leaned back, spread one hand over his chest, and said:

“Right. Now I look like a man who refuses to explain himself.”

Stack laughed so hard he bent sideways.

“Try not to wear them indoors like a prat,” Kellie said with a joking smile from across the room.

Jimmy turned his head toward her, sunglasses still on, his mouth curving into a smile.

“No promises,” Jimmy responded.

That got a little chorus of amused noises from the room, especially from Annie and Mary. Jackie came next with a gift bag in elegant cream paper. Inside were two bottles of expensive cologne, one dark and smoky, one bright and clean.

Jimmy uncapped the darker cologne, sniffed once, and shut his eyes for a beat.

“This,” Jimmy said reverently, though not too reverently, “smells like a man who shouldn’t be trusted near other people’s daughters.”

Jackie laughed outright.

“It smells expensive,” Jackie corrected.

“It smells dangerous in a tailored way,” Jimmy said approvingly. “That’s even better.”

He got up and kissed her cheek.

“Thank you, Jackie, I love this.”

“You’re welcome, baby.”

“Still reputational damage though,” Jimmy murmured with a faint frown and a half-smile, and she swatted at his arm with a laugh, then a fond smile.

Stack’s gift was, predictably, ridiculous. He handed over a medium-sized square box wrapped in purple paper with a silver bow. Jimmy tore into it, opened the lid, and then froze before letting out a bark of laughter that was sudden and boyish. Inside was a custom cereal bowl, deep glossy white with a little painted crown on one side and the words **SIR LORD MORNING MAJESTY** written around the rim in gold lettering. Tucked beside it was a matching spoon with a tiny crown at the top of the handle.

Jimmy laughed harder, his shoulders shaking. Stack was already grinning like the devil.

“Well?” Stack said.

Jimmy lifted the bowl in both hands like it was holy.

“This is fuckin’ obscene,” Jimmy said, still laughing. “This is childish. This is unnecessary. This is also one of the *best* things I’ve *ever* seen in my fuckin’ *life*.”

The room exploded.

“*Howzat*!” Jimmy shouted, holding the bowl higher.

Stack doubled over laughing.

“I *knew* it,” Stack said with a smile. “I knew you’d love it.”

Jimmy looked into the bowl, then at the spoon, then back at Stack.

“You understand me on a concerning fuckin’ level, it’s amazing!” Jimmy exclaimed.

“Somebody’s got to,” Stack said, still smiling.

Jimmy clutched the bowl to his chest.

“This is now my *official* cereal vessel. If anybody else touches it, I’ll know.”

Smoke and Annie gave him a long, flat box next. Jimmy opened it to find a pair of black leather gloves and a bottle of dark cologne that looked like it belonged in the pocket of a nightclub owner or a very charming criminal.

Jimmy held up one glove.

“Oh, this is nasty.”

Annie laughed.

“Good nasty or bad nasty?” she asked, smiling with a brow raised.

“*Good* nasty,” Jimmy said immediately, smiling. “This says, ‘I’ve come to collect debt and look fuckin’ stunning while doin’ it.’”

Smoke laughed lightly with a shake of his head. Jimmy uncapped the cologne, sniffed once, and nodded.

“And this smells like organized trouble,” Jimmy added, “excellent, quality work,

both of you. Thank you.”

Sammy, Skylar, Mary, Bo, Grace, and Delta Slim had gone in together on a record player and a stack of records.

Jimmy stared at the little turntable like he was genuinely impressed.

“A record player?” Jimmy said with a faint smile.

Delta Slim nodded with a smile.

“Figured a man that loves rock music as much as you ought to have proper equipment to play it on,” Delta Slim said with a smile.

Jimmy went through the stack of records and started reading titles, reacting to each one like he was flipping through treasure.

“This is class,” Jimmy said. “This is real fuckin’ class. None of that flimsy tin-can sound shite, this is actual music with weight.”

“Yeah, we knew you’d like it,” Grace said with a smile.

“I more than like it. I *respect* it,” Jimmy said with a smile. “Thank you.”

“Yeah,” Skylar said with an amused smile, “just don’t be blasting that damn music at six in the morning or Bo and I are going to come over to your house and kick your ass.”

Jimmy, Bo, and a few others laughed.

“Yeah, keep dreaming,” Jimmy said with raised brows, a faint frown, and a half smile.

Then came Kellie. The room shifted the second she stood up with her gift. Maybe it was because she was his girlfriend and everybody knew she’d do something at least a little bit wicked. Maybe it was the look on her face, sweet and sly at once. Whatever it was, Jimmy seemed to feel it too, because the second she walked toward him with a sleek black gift bag and that smile, he narrowed his eyes.

“Mm,” he said. “That expression’s suspicious.”

Kellie only smiled wider and handed him the bag.

“Open it,” Kellie said, still smiling.

Jimmy took it with exaggerated caution. He reached inside and first pulled out a folded length of black silk. For a second, he frowned in confusion, then opened it farther and realized it was a very sleek, very expensive-looking silk sleep set, soft black, tailored, and undeniably suggestive in a way that made half the room instantly start grinning. Tucked into it was a little note. Jimmy opened the note, read it, and immediately let out the most helpless, startled little-boy laugh anybody had heard from him all day. It burst right out of him, bright and disbelieving, like a schoolboy who’d just been caught being liked by a pretty girl. Stack laughed. Annie laughed so hard she leaned into Mary. Jimmy looked up at Kellie with his ears damn near red.

“What?” Spike demanded with a faint smile. “What does it say?”

Jimmy held the note to his chest.

“Mind your business,” Jimmy said with a faint frown and a half smile, resulting in Spike laughing with a shake of his head.

“Read it,” Stack said.

“Nope, absolutely fuckin’ not,” Jimmy said, still smiling.

“Coward,” Kellie joked as she folded her arms and tilted her head with a smile.

Jimmy looked at her, still half-laughing, then slowly, beautifully, mentally straightened back into his adult swagger. He let the note hang between two fingers, lifted one brow, and said:

“For fuck’s sake, woman. This gift is criminally suggestive.”

The room laughed. Jimmy looked back at the silk in his hands, then at her again with a smile that had gone sharp and flirtatious.

“Bold of you,” Jimmy said. “Indecently fuckin’ optimistic, too. I admire that.”

Kellie burst out laughing. Jimmy leaned back a little, recovering more of himself with each second.

“This is a very serious present,” Jimmy said. “I think I’ll require private consultation before fully reviewin’ the merchandise.”

That sent Stack into fresh hysterics. Kellie walked right up to him then, smiling, and before he could make another remark, she bent and gave him a soft kiss on the lips. Jimmy blinked at her when she pulled back, then gave the room a look of theatrical amazement.

“Shite,” Jimmy said, his voice low and delighted, “that kiss alone just raised the market value of the whole fuckin’ gift.”

The room erupted again. Kellie laughed, swatted lightly at his shoulder, and Jimmy caught her wrist for half a second just to smile at her before letting go. There was still that schoolboy sparkle in him underneath the flirt, and it made the whole thing even funnier.

“Thank you, gorgeous,” Jimmy said.

“You’re welcome, birthday boy,” Kellie said with a wink and a smile.

When she sat down again, Jimmy carefully set her gift beside him like it had become mysteriously important. After the laughter settled, Cathy came forward with a flatter, more carefully wrapped present. Her smile was softer than the others had been. Not teasing. Not flashy. Just warm. Jimmy took it and, sensing the shift somehow, opened it more slowly. Inside was a silver frame. He lifted it out. For a moment, he didn’t understand what he was seeing.

Then he did. It was a photograph from one of those mornings at Sasha’s childcare center, Jimmy, down low on one knee on the playground, laughing full-out while a little cluster of children crowded around him, one clinging to his shoulder, one tugging at his sleeve, another staring up at him like he’d hung the moon. In the background, just slightly out of focus, Sasha stood near the play structure watching him with that soft, proud look she sometimes got when he didn’t notice.

Jimmy stared. The room went quiet around him. At the bottom of the frame, in small, neat lettering, the words Cathy had engraved were: ***The man you are now.*** His thumb brushed the edge of the frame. He didn’t speak for a few seconds. When he finally looked up at Cathy, his smile was touched clear through with something deeper.

“Cathy…”

She gave the tiniest shrug.

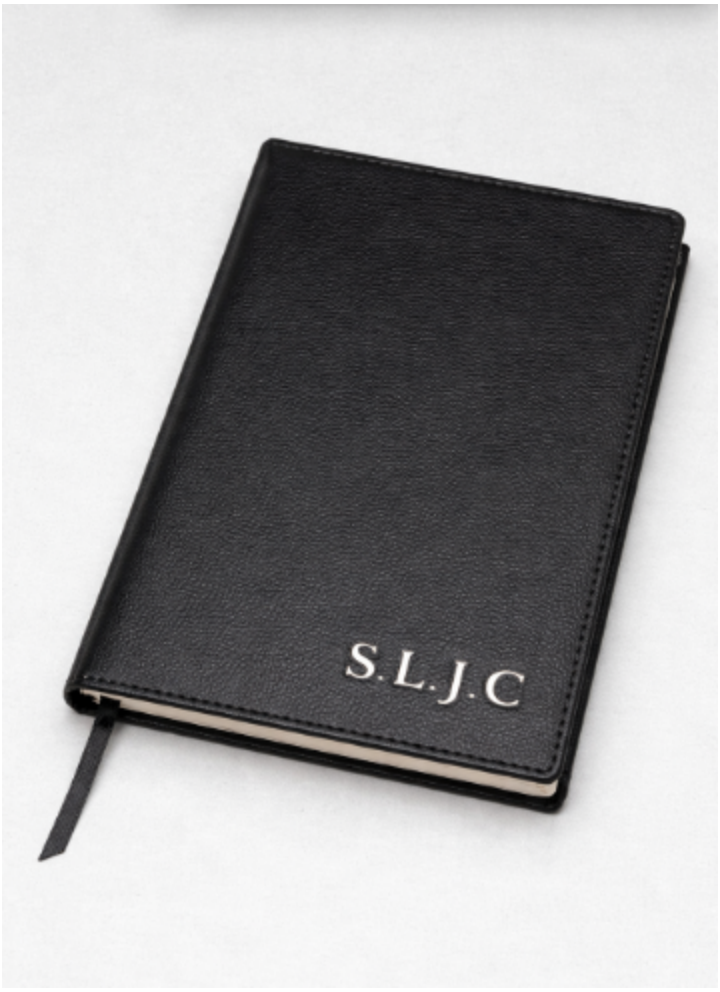
“I just thought you should have a picture of yourself the way everybody else sees you.”

That went straight through him. Jimmy stood without even thinking about it and pulled her into a tight hug.

“Thank you,” Jimmy said quietly, and the room heard the difference in his voice. “That’s… that’s beautiful.”

“Happy birthday, Jimmy,” Cathy said as she hugged him back, smiling against his shoulder.

When he sat down again, he kept the frame in his lap for a second longer than the others. Then Remmick rose. He didn’t come with a grin or a joke. Just that steady, easy warmth he had when he meant something. He handed Jimmy a rectangular box wrapped in dark green paper. Jimmy took it, looked up at him once, then opened it carefully. Inside was a black leather journal, handsome and simple, the kind of thing that felt weighty the second you touched it. On the front, embossed in understated silver, were his initials: **S.L.J.C.**



Jimmy's fingers tightened slightly around the cover. He opened it. On the first page, in Remmick's hand, was a note. Jimmy read silently at first, and the whole room watched his face change. Then, because the room had gone so quiet, he read it aloud, but softer than anyone expected:

"*For the thoughts worth keeping, and the days worth remembering. The days I'll never forget were the days when you helped me believe that a man can be more than the worst thing he's done. I hope this journal gives you a place to keep the parts of yourself that deserve to stay. Happy birthday, Jimmy. ~ Remmick.*"

Nobody said a word for a beat after that. Jimmy looked down at the page, then up at Remmick. There was a really touched smile on Jimmy's face now, one that didn't have any joke in it.

"You sentimental bastard," Jimmy said softly, but fondly. "That's…"

Jimmy stopped, stood up, and crossed the space between them in three steps to pull Remmick into a tight hug too. Remmick hugged him back just as firmly.

"You like it, then?" Remmick asked when they separated.

Jimmy looked down at the journal, then back at him.

"I love it, thank you."

Remmick smiled faintly.

"Good, I'm glad, really."

Jimmy nodded once, and the gratitude in his eyes did the rest of the speaking for him. By the time he sat back down, he was carrying all of it differently now. The laughter was still there, the birthday performance, the Sir Lord swagger, but underneath it, there was something quieter and more open. The sentimental gifts had slipped through cracks he usually kept guarded. Sasha noticed. So did Jackie. So did Ian, and then, finally, Sasha stepped forward with the last of it. She had been saving hers. Jimmy saw the colorful wrapped box in her hands and immediately straightened again, trying to recover a bit of his bravado.

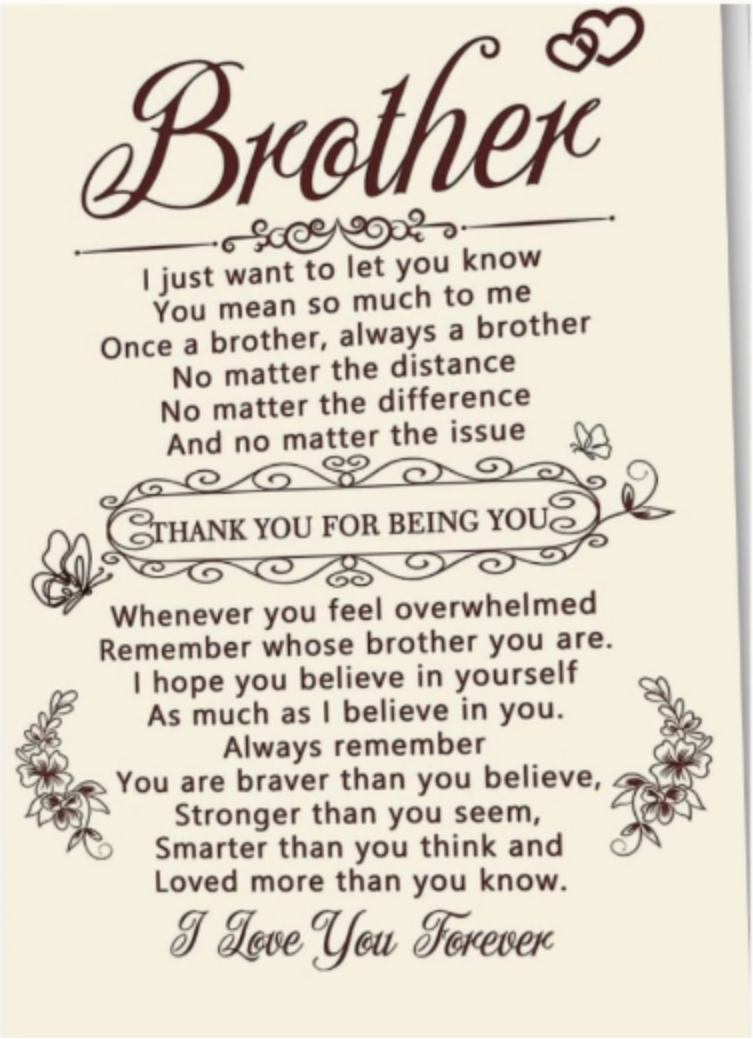
"All right," Jimmy said, clearing his throat. "Now here comes trouble."

Sasha smiled and held out not the box first, but the purple envelope.

"Card first."

Jimmy took it from her. The envelope was a rich purple, bright and cheerful, with a little *Happy Birthday* sticker sealing it. Somehow, even that suited him. He slid a finger under the flap and opened it carefully.

The room stayed quiet. Jimmy unfolded the card and looked at the words. For a second, he only read them with his eyes. Then Sasha, smiling gently, said, “Read it.” He glanced up at her, then back down, and began.


Brother
I just want to let you know
You mean so much to me
Once a brother, always a brother
No matter the distance
No matter the difference
And no matter the issue
THANK YOU FOR BEING YOU
Whenever you feel overwhelmed
Remember whose brother you are.
I hope you believe in yourself
As much as I believe in you.
Always remember
You are braver than you believe,
Stronger than you seem,
Smarter than you think and
Loved more than you know.
I Love You Forever

“Brother,” Jimmy read before his voice went a shade softer. “I just want to let you know you mean so much to me. Once a brother, always a brother. No matter the distance. No matter the difference. And no matter the issue. Thank you for being you.”

The room was dead quiet now except for Donna Lewis drifting through the speakers. Jimmy swallowed once and kept reading:

“Whenever you feel overwhelmed, remember whose brother you are. I hope you believe in yourself as much as I believe in you. Always remember you are braver than you believe, stronger than you seem, smarter than you think, and loved more than you know. I love you forever.”

By the end of it, his voice had changed, just slightly, not enough that anyone could call it trembling outright, but enough. Jimmy lowered the card. He didn’t say anything though; he just stared at it for a second, his jaw working once, his eyes brightening in a way that made Sasha’s own heart pinch. He looked up at her, and his face was visibly moved, openly so, but he held back any remark exactly like she knew he would. No joke. No curse. No defense. He

simply laid the card on his lap softly as if it were porcelain, then he grabbed the big rainbow-wrapped box.

The paper was loud and bright, striped in every color, topped with a big curled bow. Very Sasha. Very joyful. Very impossible to miss. Jimmy let out one small breath through his nose and started unwrapping. He opened it more slowly than he had opened anything else all day. First came tissue paper, then his hand disappeared into the box, then he stopped. His fingers closed around fabric. He lifted out the jacket.

It was black, clean-lined, sharp, a varsity-style jacket with striped cuffs and trim, rich-looking and tailored, and on the chest was a bold white **J**, crisp and striking against the dark fabric. Jimmy froze. The room felt like it had gone even stiller, impossible as that was. He held the jacket up in both hands, just staring at it.

“Goddamn,” Skylar whispered under his breath.

Jimmy barely heard him as he ran his hand over the letter. Then he looked back into the box and saw there was still more. Inside, nestled beneath the jacket, was a smaller velvet box. Jimmy set the jacket across his lap, opened the velvet box, and inside, resting against black lining, was the chain. Thick. Brilliant. Flashing like it had trapped light inside itself. And hanging from it was the pendant, the letter **J**.

It wasn’t cheap, it wasn’t costume jewelry, and it wasn’t playful. This thing looked *serious*, *expensive*, *custom*, and bright enough and blinged out enough to make half the room blink. Jimmy stared at it, then at the jacket, then at the card, then back at Sasha, and he didn’t speak. His eyes had gone shimmery now, unmistakably. He blinked once, twice, like maybe that would fix it, but it only made the emotion more visible. The whole room watched the realization move through him, not just that the gifts were beautiful, but that Sasha had seen him exactly.

The vanity, the style, the swagger, the Sir Lord showmanship, yes. But also the card, the words under it, the love under all of it. Before Sasha could say a thing, Jimmy leaned suddenly toward her and pulled her into a tight, warm hug. It took her aback for half a heartbeat, just because of how fast and instinctive it was, but then she wrapped her arms around him right back. The room stayed quiet. Jimmy held on. When he finally pulled away, he wiped quickly under one eye with the side of his hand like he was annoyed with himself for tearing up in public. He laughed once under his breath, embarrassed, and looked down at the jacket and chain again.

“This…” Jimmy said, then stopped and tried again. “This is the absolute *best* fuckin’ gift I’ve *ever* gotten in my entire life.”

The emotion in his voice landed all over the room. He shook his head a little, still wiping tears away too fast, trying to act like nobody had seen them, even though everybody absolutely had.

“And that card,” Jimmy said, glancing back at it, “those words… that’s just beautiful.”

Sasha’s eyes were shimmering with tears now too. Jimmy looked at her fully then, and looked around at the room after that, as if suddenly everybody there needed to hear this.

“I’m telling you, I am fuckin’ *blessed*,” Jimmy said, the words coming rough and honest and completely unguarded, “to have a sister like Sasha.”

That hit the room like a warm wave. Jackie covered her mouth. Kellie smiled so hard it almost hurt. Ian looked down and smiled to himself; even Smoke’s expression softened. Jimmy laughed quietly, almost in disbelief at himself now, and looked back at Sasha.

“I love you, sis, I love you *so* much.”

That surprised everybody, not because they doubted it. Just because Jimmy was not usually the type to put something that naked and plain out in the middle of a room full of people. Sasha let out a soft laugh, half joy, half overwhelmed.

“Aww, I love you too, baby bro,” she said.

And then she leaned in and hugged him again. Jimmy hugged her back just as tightly and kissed her on the cheek, one hand still clutching the jacket, the velvet necklace box open on his lap, the birthday card resting beside him like a second heartbeat. Around them, the room seemed to glow a little warmer, full of balloons and sunlight and confetti and people who loved him enough to sit quietly while he had the exact kind of moment he usually joked his way around. For once, Sir Lord Jimmy Crystal did not run from it.

Scene Song: “Agape” ~ Nicholas Britell

A little while later, the lights in the living room dimmed just enough for the candles to matter. The chatter softened. People shifted around the coffee table and sofa, making room. Balloons glowed faintly in the warm afternoon light still pouring through Sasha’s windows, and the confetti on the floor and table caught little sparks of gold and color. Someone turned the music down low, just enough for the room to breathe around it. Then Sasha came out carrying the cake, and Jimmy absolutely lost his *mind*.

It was impossible not to. The cake was bright, joyful, and completely unapologetically him. Rich blue frosting wrapped the whole thing in a bold, almost regal color, with rainbow sprinkles everywhere in cheerful explosions along the sides and across the top. At the center sat a glittering silver tiara topper, set proudly above a brilliant blue panel with a jeweled **J** shining in the middle like a tiny royal crest. Thin birthday candles flickered around it, their little flames trembling gold in the soft light. Jimmy stared, then his eyes widened so much he almost looked six years old instead of thirty-seven.

“No fuckin’ way!” he exclaimed.

The whole room burst into laughter. He shot up from the sofa so fast the cushion bounced under him.

“Look at *that*!” Jimmy shouted, pointing at the cake like it had descended from heaven specifically to honor him. “Look at this magnificent bastard!”

Sasha laughed so hard she had to stop for half a second before setting it down safely on the coffee table. Jimmy was already hovering near it with pure birthday-child energy, his smile huge, and him actually bouncing once on his feet.

“The *blue*! It matches my *eyes*! The *sprinkles*! The *crown*!” he said, his voice rising in delighted disbelief. “There’s a **J** in the tiara. There’s a whole fuckin’ **J** in the tiara!”

Annie covered her mouth laughing, and Stack threw his head back laughing.

“Man is *gone*,” Stack said with a smile.

“He’s fully gone,” Smoke muttered, briefly and faintly smiling despite himself.

Jimmy lightly clapped twice, unable to help it, then looked at Sasha with open, shining delight.

“Sasha, this is obscene.”

She laughed.

“Obscene?” she replied with a faint frown and a half smile.

“In the *best* possible way,” Jimmy said instantly, his eyes darting back to the cake. “This is art. This is architecture. This is fuckin’ sugar-based worship.”

That made Jackie smile softly. Jimmy stooped down slightly to get closer to the cake, staring at it with reverence so genuine it was ridiculous.

“I can’t believe this exists,” he breathed with a child-like, amazed smile. “It’s *blue*.”

“Yeah,” Sasha said, laughing. “I know.”

“And there’s a *tiara* on it,” he said, still smiling.

“Yeah,” Sasha responded.

“With a ***J***.”

Sasha laughed.

“Yeah, Jimmy.”

He looked at the room as if everybody needed to understand the scale of this triumph.

“This is the *best* cake I’ve *ever* seen in my life,” Jimmy said, still with a full smile.

“You say that like you’ve been waiting your whole life for a cake with your own letter in a crown,” Kellie said after laughing.

“I have,” Jimmy said, deeply serious.

That sent the room up again. He kept smiling down at the cake, almost glowing with it now, chains catching the candlelight, tiara glittering on his own head like the real-life echo of the one on the cake. He looked so absurdly, innocently delighted that Sasha had to blink back a little wave of emotion herself.

“All right,” Ian said warmly. “Everybody ready?”

People gathered closer. Sasha stood nearest Jimmy. Kellie slid in on his other side. Jackie moved closer too, and around them the whole room tightened into that affectionate little birthday circle, the kind made of warmth and teasing and people who genuinely wanted to be there. Jimmy clasped his hands together once near his chest, still smiling at the cake like it might run off if he looked away too long. Then everybody started singing.

“**Happy birthday to you…**”

Jimmy’s whole face changed. He smiled in this open, delighted, almost disbelieving way, his eyes moving from the cake to the people around him and back again. He stood there taking it in with the shining look of a child trying very hard not to explode from excitement before the right part. At one point, he actually clapped along softly to the rhythm, then caught himself and pretended he hadn’t, which only made Sasha laugh.

“**Happy birthday to you…**”

By the time they got to “dear Jimmy,” the room was smiling as much at him as at the song. Even Smoke was singing, low and dry about it, which Jimmy seemed to notice and file away as deeply funny.

“**Happy birthday, dear Jimmyyyy…**”

Jimmy looked around at all of them with exaggerated awe.

“Shite, that’s a lot of affection,” Jimmy muttered under his breath, though he was smiling too hard for the line to land as a complaint.

“**Happy birthday to you!**”

They finished with laughter and cheers and a few extra claps, and Jimmy stood there in the middle of it all looking wonderfully dazed by happiness. Sasha smiled at him.

“Okay. Make a wish,” Sasha said.

Jimmy looked down at the candles. The room hushed. He drew in a breath, then closed his eyes. For a few seconds, he actually looked serious. Still. His face softened, all the performance falling off him for just a moment. He stood there with the candlelight warming his cheeks and his lashes dark against his face, and for once Sir Lord Jimmy Crystal looked

less like a self-invented king and more like a man holding something quiet and real in both hands. Then one eye cracked open. He frowned faintly.

“Wait,” Jimmy said.

The room broke into surprised laughter. Jimmy opened both eyes and gestured vaguely at the cake.

“If the wish is obviously about this level of cake excellence, does that still count, or is that too fuckin’ predictable?”

Stack almost folded in half in laughter. Sasha laughed.

“Just make a wish, boy,” Sasha said, smiling and playfully hitting his arm.

Jimmy laughed.

“I am makin’ one,” Jimmy said, smiling. “I’m tryin’ to negotiate properly with the universe.”

“Look, you goin’ quit stalin’ or what?” Annie said, laughing.

“No, I’m not stalling,” Jimmy protested while laughing. “I’m being spiritually precise.”

That line got Smoke laughing under his breath, and Jackie shaking her head with a smile.

“All right, all right,” Jimmy said while lightly laughing.

Jimmy closed his eyes again, trying once more. This time, Skylar, who had been leaning with casual ease near the far side of the sofa, folded his arms and tossed in:

“You’d better hurry up and blow those candles out before the wax starts droppin’ into the frosting and you throw a full royal tantrum over contaminated cake.”

The room cracked up. Jimmy opened his eyes and turned his head slowly toward Skylar with regal offense.

“First of all,” Jimmy said with a faint frown and a half smile, and while pointing at Skylar, “I do *not* throw tantrums. I issue emotionally justified responses to culinary sabotage.”

Skylar laughed. Jimmy looked back at the cake, then back at him.

“And second, if one bastard drop of fuckin’ wax lands in that blue frosting, I’ll haunt the lot of you while still alive.”

That sent everybody up again, including Skylar, who laughed and tipped his chin like fair enough.

“All right, all right,” Skylar said. “Blow it out, Your Majesty.”

“You’re deeply irritatin’, but on this particular day I’ll allow it,” Jimmy said as he narrowed his eyes with a faint smile.

“Honored,” Skylar said with a smile as he put a hand to his chest.

Jimmy lightly laughed, turned back to the cake, and closed his eyes one more time. This time, Jimmy stayed quiet long enough that the room really did settle. The laughter faded into soft smiles. Sasha watched him, Kellie glanced at him, and then at Sasha. Ian stood with that fatherly warmth in his face. Jackie’s expression had gone tender and knowing. Even the louder energies in the room, Stack, Spike, and Smoke, seemed to fall still around Jimmy for those few seconds. And because it was Jimmy, because it was this strange, beautiful afterlife where the sun stayed warm in December, and love kept showing up in the forms he never expected, the moment felt bigger than just candles and frosting. Then Jimmy opened his eyes. He looked at the cake once, smiled, and blew. The candles went out in one clean rush. Everyone erupted—cheers, clapping, laughter, somebody shouting, “*Howzat*!” before Jimmy himself could, which made him point wildly around the room in mock accusation.

“Hey! That’s *my* line!” Jimmy exclaimed, smiling.

Then Jimmy laughed, *really* laughed, bright and full and loose, not the hard-edged laugh he used like armor, but the *real* one, the one that made him look younger and lighter all at once. Sasha clapped with the rest while smiling. Jimmy stood there in the middle of the cheering with the extinguished candles smoking gently in front of him, the tiara on the cake glittering under the room light, his own tiara catching the last of the afternoon sun, and for a few seconds, he didn’t seem to know what to do with all that happiness except stand inside it and let it happen. Then Stack came up behind him and said:

“All right, birthday king, move before I eat your corner.”

Jimmy spun around at once.

“You’ll lose the hand,” Jimmy said with a faint frown and a half smile.

Stack laughed.

“See?” Skylar said, smiling, “tantrum.”

“It’s not a tantrum,” Jimmy snapped, though he was still smiling. “It’s fuckin’ perimeter enforcement.”

The room laughed again, but softer now, more settled. The big moment had passed into that lovely afterglow where everything felt a little warmer, a little looser, a little more precious because everybody knew it had landed. Sasha moved closer to him again, her shoulder brushing his.

“You happy?”

Jimmy looked at her, not around her, not past her, *at* her. Then he glanced at the cake, at the people, at the banner still blazing across the wall, at the balloons, at Skylar smirking, at Kellie smiling, at Jackie, Ian, Remmick, *all* of them. His expression changed, not dramatically, just enough, enough for the room to feel it.

“Aye,” Jimmy said, and this time there wasn’t even any joke tucked into it, “*more* than happy.”

Sasha’s face softened. Jimmy looked back at the cake again and laughed quietly through his nose, almost to himself.

“In another life,” Jimmy said, low enough that people had to listen, “I’d probably have ruined a day like this.”

The room went still. Jimmy kept looking at the cake.

“But *here*, in *this* life, I didn’t,” Jimmy said. “I got all this instead.”

Nobody rushed to fill the silence, they didn’t need to, because there he was, Sir Lord Jimmy Crystal in his tracksuit and chains and tiara, standing in the middle of a bright, ridiculous, beautiful room full of people who loved him, looking at a blue birthday cake like it was proof of something larger than sugar, and maybe it was. Sasha slipped her arm through his, and Jimmy let her. Outside, Pelmont stayed golden and warm, the sky clear and impossible and kind. Inside, laughter began again, low and easy now, people moving toward plates and forks and the practical holiness of cake-sharing. But for one lingering beat longer, Jimmy stayed where he was, smiling at the extinguished candles, held in the glow of the wish he had made and the one he no longer had to—because the truest thing in the room was already here. He was loved, and for once, wonderfully, unmistakably, Sir Lord Jimmy Crystal *knew* it.